

West of England Combined Authority Committee meeting on Wednesday, 18 January 2023

Questions received from the public and the Mayor's response

1. Brendon Taylor, Bristol Disabled Equalities Forum

Question 1

What provision is made to retain these services alongside Demard responsive services? The following services need to be retain in Gloucestershire/ South Gloucestershire alongside DRT. Yate to wootton under edge; Yate to kingswood 86 84 85 ; 622 chipping sodbury to yate bus station Thornbury and cribbs causeway; Bristol parkway to seven Beach. 12; Thornbury to Dursey via charfield 60. Thornbury to Dursey via Berkley. 62; 10 11 Thornbury to Avonmouth/ shirehampton

Response from the Mayor:

Supported bus services are paid for via the transport levy. It is the responsibility of the three local councils to provide funding for these socially necessary services. Last year these councils' leaders indicated they would increase the levy by up to 10%, but in the event, no increase was forthcoming. This year the councils have again decided to freeze the amount of levy they are paying, which equates to an 11% real terms decrease – in reality arguably much higher given the extremely high inflation rate being experienced by the UK transport industry. In addition the amount spent on levy services (rather than other items the levy funds) is being reduced in cash terms by £1.8m at a time when costs to run buses (because of rising fuel, maintenance and staff costs) has significantly risen. This means there will be fewer bus services. Once again less is being invested in West of England transport services than elsewhere.

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Short term, I unfortunately, cannot stop this but long term I have asked the Government for tax raising powers so that instead of the councils paying a levy, I can instead raise the money directly – in a similar way that our region’s Police and Crime Commissioner currently charges council tax payers to help fund policing. Alongside this I would also need the power to spend the money directly too.

In addition, this would allow a genuine discussion with the public on the level that people think is appropriate to invest on local transport.

I do have access to a large sum of money for buses that I secured from government but it specifically cannot be spent on supported buses. It was a great success to get the second highest amount of funding in the country. That is why I have been able to reduce bus fares with more to come and why I am introducing **WEST link**, the new on demand service. However, people should not think of **WEST link** as a replacement for supported buses and it would be a mistake to do so. Indeed, as mentioned the money secured for this specifically cannot be spent on supported services. Instead it is a new system designed to get people to main transport corridors.

2. Jackie Head, Chew Valley Area Forum Climate & Nature Emergency working group

Question 1

As the mayor will be aware I have been working as part of the Chew Valley Area Forum Climate & Nature Emergency working group for the last 2 years lobbying for improved public transport in the Chew Valley and linking the Chew Valley to other areas. We are delighted to see that a clear plan (Green Link) is on the table to deliver Dynamic Demand Responsive Transport from Summer 2023. As a group we would like to help ensure that there is good uptake for this scheme and that local people know how to access the service and are clear about the positive carbon-reducing benefits of doing so. From our research into DDRT schemes around the country we are aware that they work best when combined with adequate, reliable and appropriate fixed route services and when members of the public are fully involved in making the service happen.

Can the mayor reassure us that (a) He will be working with groups such as ours to direct publicity and comms about DDRT to groups and communities in ways that they will be likely to engage with? Can this conversation begin now to ensure a quick and significant transition? (b) That fixed routes will be upheld or, in the case of Chew Valley, introduced within these rural areas in order to form the spine of DDRT offerings?

Response from the Mayor:

Thank you for all your work on the Chew Valley Area Forum Climate & Nature Emergency working group. There is a climate and ecological emergency and if we are to meet our very ambitious 2030 net zero targets we will need to encourage more people out of cars and onto public transport.

When I was at a very well attended Big Choices public event last summer (that the Chew Valley Area Forum most helpfully organised) you told me about some of your aspirations for smaller minibus style travel which I hope I am addressing in two ways.

Firstly, the introduction of **WEST link**, the new on-demand service coming this summer which will run in the Chew Valley area is designed to get people from areas such as yours to key transport corridors. As a new transport option, it is important this is communicated to local people effectively and well and I agree it will be vital to work with groups such as yours so local people know exactly what is on offer.

Secondly, I am also shortly introducing a Community Innovation Fund that local groups will be able to apply for to secure grants to help run hyper-local buses. I am able to do this thanks to the large sum of money I secured – the second highest in the UK - for new and innovative bus solutions.

WEST link and the Community Innovation Fund are not designed to replace fixed route services. Indeed, this money specifically cannot be spent on supported buses. Where there is a social need for a bus it is unitary councils responsibility to fund it via the transport levy and I cannot make any commitments on supported services as I do not control the budget.

Question 2

When considering the viability of supported bus routes will he consider a) and b) above, and also count the high value of decarbonising transport in rural areas given that rural cars drive into and clog up cities and the majority of the rural population are currently car owners and so the greatest transition to low carbon transport is needed and possible in rural areas? When making decisions just on numbers per journey rural areas will always lose out and we are keen that this should not happen on this occasion?

Mayor's response:

I very much wanted to explore an evidence-led approach to changes to supported bus services. I do not support the current package and believe they will disproportionately affect certain groups including students and communities where for example Bath appears to have been prioritised over NE Somerset.

When the West of England Combined Authority was formed it became the legal transport authority. However local councils kept the responsibility to pay for supported bus services (non commercial ones where there is a social need) and are the only ones with tax raising powers to pay for them.

Therefore it was agreed the Councils would pay a 'transport levy' to the Combined Authority and then the Combined Authority would buy the best services possible with that money. It would mean a regional, more strategic approach and help in getting economies of scale.

However in reality two things have now happened:

1. The councils have said they will only pay the levy for bus services they specifically choose in their areas

2. The amount they pay is falling in real terms

Councils acting parochially makes the concept of the levy redundant when it comes to supported services. The councils say this is the only deal on the agenda, so I can either vote for the buses they choose or for no buses at all! What is happening is that West of England staff are doing the work to procure services but can no longer secure them based on evidence and the result is a sub optimal transport network. I have been speaking to ministers and shadow ministers about this unfortunate situation which appears to be too linked to the electoral cycle rather than social need. While I plan to vote for the supported bus package (as it is the only one unitary councils are willing to fund and the alternative is no supported buses at all), if I had the powers to use the money wisely and well I would have made different decisions, decisions that I believe would be both better and fairer and more evidence based.

3. Ian Beckey, Somerset Catch the Bus

Question 1

What plans do West of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council have to bring in Demand responsive Network whilst protecting the rural bus Networks as an interchange with main line bus Network and hubs are very important?

Mayor's response:

I am very pleased to be introducing **WEST link** minibuses which will use clever algorithms to best join up several people's needs, combining them into one trip to get passengers to where they need to be as efficiently as possible. The minibuses will run in zones designed to get people to key transport corridors where they can then pick up another bus or train. The scheme is being funded by the West of England Combined Authority predominantly using money secured from government through the Bus Service Improvement Plan. This money cannot be spent on existing supported services with taxpayer subsidy but instead must be invested in services that are innovative and new.

As you rightly say there needs to be a bus for passengers to board at the end of their **WEST link** journey. Supported bus services are paid for via the transport levy and it is the responsibility of local councils to provide funding for these socially necessary services. The councils have frozen the amount of levy they are paying, equating to a 11% real terms decrease. In addition, the amount spent on levy services (rather than other items the levy funds) has reduced by £1.8m at a time when costs to run buses (because of rising fuel and staff costs) has significantly risen. This means there will be fewer bus services.

I very much hope **WEST link** will be a success. But I do note these changes will be disruptive, take time, and we will have to learn lessons as we work hard to get things right. Nevertheless I urge people to try **WEST link** and embrace this positive opportunity to shape our transport future for the better.

4. Robbie Bentley/David Redgewell, South West Transport Network

Question 1

What is WECA doing to fill the gaps in the Bus Network across the region?

Response from the Mayor:

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Question 2

What progress is being made on the transfer of Infrastructure from BCC, BANES and South Glos' Councils?

Response from the Mayor:

The West of England Combined Authority and Bristol City Council have held informal discussions to explore potential opportunities for transfer of responsibilities from Bristol Council to the West of England Combined Authority, in line with those typically undertaken by a strategic Transport Authority. I would welcome similar discussions with the other councils. Further discussions are being scheduled during January. It is vital that at the same time that any staff are transferred that associated powers are also transferred to the West of England Combined Authority. There must also be proper due diligence of the financial implications, for example including pension liabilities, to ensure value for money for the taxpayer.

5. Cllr Tim Rippington, Brislington East

Question 1

Supported Services in Brislington I have been working with Bristol City Council and then WECA since January 2020 to try to bring improvements to the supported bus service in Brislington. The current 513/4 service does not serve many of the places people want to go, and takes different routes on alternative days which is confusing. I note that both the 513/4 service and a new 523 circular service appear in the long-list. I presume that both these services will not be funded. Will the new 523 service be funded rather than the older services, and if so please can WECA please consult with myself and other local councillors before finalising the route that this service will take?

The 36 service which serves St Anne's was truncated by First Bus in October 2022, leaving many people stranded. WECA has funded an extended 96 service, but the route of this service is circular and it only runs every 2 hours, so it has not proved to be any kind of useful substitute. The operator of the service has confirmed to me that the current circular route was a mistake which needs to be rectified.

I note that a service 521 from Hengrove to Brislington is included in the long list.

Response from the Mayor:

Brislington and St Annes will benefit from **WEST link**. It is hoped that smaller minibuses will be more attractive to drive and train on than traditional large buses - allowing bus companies to recruit more drivers at a time of unprecedented and acute bus driver shortages. While a

national problem, the West of England currently has a shortage of over 250 bus drivers which has put existing bus routes under immense pressure, with services reduced or even cut over recent months.

Question 2

Please can you ensure that this service, if funded, will take an “out and back” route through Brislington to directly replace the lost 36 service, and run more frequently than every two hours, which makes it basically useless to most people. If not, please can you work directly with First Bus to ensure that the 36 service is returned to its full route as soon as a sufficient number of drivers becomes available?

Response from the Mayor:

The 36 bus was a commercially operated service, and the West of England Combined Authority has no powers to compel private operators to run buses. I will raise the points you make directly with First at my next meeting with them. One of the reasons for First withdrawing services is the severe driver shortage.

6. David Redgewell, South West Transport Network Railfuture and Ian Beckey, Gloucestershire catch the bus service campaign

Question 1

In view of the very Deep concerns across the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council area about bus services. Will the metro mayor Dan Norris and the combined transport Authority and councillor Steve Hogg of North Somerset council Protect the existing support bus Network and that serve communities so people can travel to work, Education ,heath care shopping ,leisure and Tourism. So that the communities left without existing bus by the withdrawn of the commercial bus Network get reconnected to public transport?

Response from the Mayor:

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Question 2

What action is the combined transport Authority and North Somerset council doing to set up an enhanced quality partnership scheme with the West of England buses operators First group plc west of England buses and stagecoach west plus smaller

operators as part of bus back better the National bus strategy under 2017 Transport act To set up a bus service Advisory Board and Bus Forum to hold be operators to account on commercial bus Network and support bus Network?

Response from the Mayor:

The West of England Combined Authority is in the process of establishing the first regional Enhanced Partnership. The formal process commenced in late November 2022. The first round of meetings are due to be held in Spring 2023.

End